

Cultural Ties and the Challenge of Ethnic Politics in Contemporary Nigeria; A Study in Historical Origins

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Abstract

The Challenges of conducting and having a free, fair and credible elections in Nigeria have become daunting. The issue of ethnic politics is undoubtedly, one of these challenges. Thus, the concept of ethnicity and politics in Nigeria is crucial in the analysis of Nigeria's political development in the colonial and post-colonial period. The character of the nationalist movements which later lost its initial unity of direction to factional pressures and the emergence of the Federal principle that was reinforced by the evolution of separatist and regional outlooks had their foundations in the intrusion of ethnic considerations into practical politics. This paper examines the beginnings of the politicization of ethnicity in Nigeria and the role that cultural ties can play in improving it. The work relies on primary and secondary data for its analysis. The secondary data were subjected to textual and contextual analysis albeit adopting the historical method that involves the collection and interpretation of data. The study shows that ethnicisation of politics in Nigeria predates the often emphasized crisis within the Nigerian Youth Movement in 1941 by scholars and that cultural ties and even organisations like mosques, churches and officials of different religious and belief systems working together, could be used to integrate the various ethnic groups while maintaining their identities, as ways out of the ethnic politics ?nightmare?.

Index terms— cultural ties, challenge, ethnic politics, historical origin and nigeria.

1 Introduction

development, in different climes is predicated on co-operation from among the components of such climes. 1 In a nation where people are conscious of 'self' alone, the corporate growth of the nation could be truncated unless the people work as a team. For a country like Nigeria that was ruled for about six decades before attaining independence in 1960, the need to forge unity out of the diverse peoples cannot be over-emphasised. This is even more compelling if we consider the fact that the country has a "land mass of about 923,768sq.kms, an area that is the size of France, Britain and the Netherlands combined". 2 Unfortunately, since the attainment of political independence in October 1960, Nigeria appeared not to have had it 'right' with the conduct of elections as ethnicity have impacted negatively on the choice of candidates save for Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan.

Arising from the foregoing, this paper examines the challenge of ethnic politics in contemporary Nigeria and the role that cultural ties can play in improving the situation. It recommends that a way out of this challenge is to foster unity among the diverse peoples with organisations such as mosques, churches, officials of the different religions and belief systems working together. That way, the phenomenon of ethnic politics could be better checked. The paper is divided into four main sections. Immediately following this introduction is an explanation of the concepts of ethnicity, politics and politics of ethnicity. The third section examines the genesis of the politicization of ethnicity in the Nigeria nation-state. The fourth section deals with culture and its relevance in Nigeria in the post-colonial period, while the last section deals with suggestions and conclusion.

2 II.

3 Ethnicity, Politics and Politics of

Ethnicity; Conceptual Clarification a) Ethnicity F.I.A. Omu, over a decade ago, defined ethnicity as "the consciousness of belonging to, identifying with and being loyal to a social group distinguished by shared cultural traditions, a common language, in-group sentiments and self identity". 3 The crucial question however, is: how did it begin especially with regards to the Nigeria nation-state?. It is important to note from the outset that the phenomenon is a global issue and not peculiar to Nigeria. Explanations for its existence therefore, has been global. For example, Guideri and Pellizi, identified two reasons for its occurrence: first, is the fact that many societies are multi-national in composition, and second, is the factor of colonialism. 4 In Africa, scholars have tied it to the nature and purpose of colonialism. 5 It is important to note that ethnicity is group consciousness and nothing more. The desire to have basic amenities and not colonialism, for instance, fuelled ethnic clashes in different parts of the world, and as noted by Jan Nederveen Pieterse, "it is more realistic to think of ethnicity as a continuum, varying in terms of salience, intensity and meaning". 6 Consciousness of belonging to a group predated colonialism and as such the later could not have been the propellant to ethnicity, whether in Nigeria, Africa and anywhere in the world.

4 b) Politics

The impression which people have had about politics is its equation with political parties, elections, competition and a lot more, 7 but can the explanation of these variables be said to constitute politics? In fact, a scholar defined the term "politics" as the "game of who gets what, when and how". 8 No doubt, the state is a territorial division divided into government and subjects, the government being a body of persons within the state who have the legal imperatives upon which the state rest. Against this reality, "every citizen of the modern world is the subject of a state". 9 Brilliant as the postulation that politics is "the game of who gets what, when and how" looks, the failure to explain what is "what", "how the what is" and when is the "when" limits the utility of the definition. 10 Even though it is not intended in this paper to dabble into the intellectual debate of what constitutes politics, it need to be noted that power or authority, resource allocation, conflict and conflict resolution, agitation, competition and government are crucial elements of politics. c) Politics of Ethnicity Two words that have been used by scholars to describe politics of ethnicity are: 'emancipation' and 'domination'. 11 Basically, the manner in which ethnicity has been expressed for over two hundred years led to the fall of empires and demise of absolutism and consequently, a shift from the age of nationalism to the age of ethnicity. The politics of ethnicity has therefore, become emancipatory in outlook. As Pieterse put it; "it is not that ethnicity discourses can be regarded as liberatory or progressive, for the most conspicuous feature of ethnicity is its unrelenting particularism while its social practice is that of domination within?" 12 . Central to the politics of ethnicity therefore, is the factor of ethnic identity formation. Ethnic groups exist as interest groups with two levels of formation; first, is competition that arises during the process of assimilation, and the second is ethnic mobilization. Where this takes place, according to Wang, "it becomes moderate because it is only when the non-assimilated members have been recruited within the ethnic enclosure that the movement become radicalized". 13 For Nigeria, before the attainment of political independence in 1960, interests clashed and produced conflicts that became manifest in politics in the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century. By the 1940s therefore, in Nigeria, the logic of colonial rule helped to heighten the ethnic cleavage of the peoples. The first group that took advantage of this were the elite and hence less than a decade after independence, ethnic 'germ' manifested in different angles, for example, in the civil war of 1967-1970. Even when the country came out from the latter without being torn into 'parts', by 1979 and four years later (1983), the results of federal elections conducted then were indicators of ethnic considerations in the voting pattern of the electorates. 14

5 III.

The Beginning of Politicization and Accentuation of Ethnicity in Nigeria Politics

The impression given by most scholars as to when politics became ethnicized in Nigeria was the crisis that rocked the Nigeria Youth Movement (NYM) in 1941. 15 However, a closer analysis shows that politicization of ethnicity predates 1941 as the mood of the 1940s were an accumulation of grievances that manifested as soon as Nnamdi Azikiwe (of blessed memory) arrived the political scene in Nigeria. The crisis within the NYM has been viewed to have laid the bastion of ethnic assertiveness that was later built upon by others. How correct is this perception? Available data suggests that the ethnic 'germ' entry into politics was earlier.

The NYM, emerged out of the Lagos Youth Movement, LYM, founded in 1934 to protest the low status accorded to Yaba College of Technology. 16 The movement later assumed national outlook and began to show its desire to develop a united country. However, from the outset, there were indicators of the incompatibility of ideology and method within the movement. For instance, the group within the movement led by Henry Oladapo Davies, favoured a militant and confrontational approach by emphasising that "the rights of our people, pressing for those rights, sacrificing for them and dying for them if need be" 17 , the other arm of the movement under the leadership of K.A. Abayomi, were more accommodating and constitutional in their approach.

Furthermore, personality difference and issues that bordered on finance and interest appeared to have strained the unity that ought to have existed between the two groups of the movement, namely, H.O. Davies and K.A. Abayomi. Other prominent personalities that belonged to the movement were: Ernest Sesei Ikoli, Olayimika Alakija, Samuel Akinsaya and later Nnamdi Azikiwe who had just returned to the country after his studies. Before then, Ernest Sesei Ikoli had already established his African Messenger. The Daily Service was also established as the official organ of the NYM in 1938, just as Nnamdi Azikiwe established The West African Pilot upon his return from the Gold Coast (now Ghana) where he was successful with The Post but ran As it were, the Daily Service which was the mouth piece of the NYM was re-organised with H.O. Davies and Ernest Ikoli in charge. Thus, by the end of 1938, the three notable personalities within the NYM and belonged to the same profession of journalism were: Davies, Ikoli and Azikiwe. Elections into Lagos legislative council were also close, but "Olayimika Alakija, a nonmember of the movement who was on the verge being nominated", 19 suddenly died in 1939 -an event that necessitated the selection of NYM candidates to contest a bye-election to choose a representative for the party.

The result of that election showed that Jubril Martins scored 90, Akinola Maja, 87, H.O. Davies, 86, Ernest Ikoli had 80, Samuel Akinsaya polled 68 votes while Azikiwe had 33 votes. 20 It was obvious that Azikiwe did not have what was required for him to have been elected as he came last, but the interpretation that was given by analysts was that it could have been orchestrated by persons who may have been "deeply troubled" by his journalistic and political achievements. 21 Again, in 1941, K.A. Abayomi's seat in the legislative council became vacant given the fact that he had gone to the United Kingdom on Government scholarship, to do a course in an aspect of medicine and his period of absence was not in agreement with the period allowed by regulations. A replacement was therefore needed.

By this time, the elected officials of the Nigeria Youth Movement amongst others, were: Ernest Ikoli (President) and Samuel Akinsaya (Vice President). Surprisingly, these officers were still the same persons that were presented at the General Meeting of the movement. Samuel Akinsaya got 108 votes against Ernest Ikoli's 60 votes. 22 As was the custom, the results were forwarded to the Executive Committee of the movement which considered and voted again with Samuel Akinsaya polling 25 votes against Ikoli's 30. The choice of Ikoli provoked uproar and the result was nullified. However, when bye-election was to be held in March of that year, Akinsaya's name was on the list of candidates. Attempts at resolving the impasse arising therefrom, not only failed, but "other peace efforts failed. 23 Nnamdi Azikiwe later resigned from the movement and Akinsaya also left. The problem of division within the party later led to its collapse.

The above now raises the question: How did the crisis in the NYM lay the foundation of ethnic politics in Nigeria?. The point have been suggested that Nnamdi Azikiwe fueled ethnicity in politics arising from the fact that "all the Easterners excepting a handful of non-Ibo intellectuals and most of the Ijebus left the organisation". 24 Obviously, Azikiwe's reference to discrimination against Akinsaya in the contest to replace Abayomi seem to be the main source of the accusation that he introduced ethnicity in his subsequent campaigns in the West African Pilot. It is important to note that in the nomination contest, Azikiwe supported Akinsaya and in the election campaign, he also used both press and platform in the fight for Akinsaya. In fact, it was in the course of this campaign that the West African Pilot accused the Executive Committee of discriminating against Akinsaya because he was from Ijebuland. Was Azikiwe an Ijebu man?. Certainly, not.

The West African Pilot as it were, was of the opinion that the general dislike of the Ijebu people who were seen as the Jews of Yorubaland, 25 had been discriminated on the basis of historic prejudice and his supporters, most of whom were from Ijebuland could not have been happy with the rejection of their leader.

On the other hand, it should be noted that the crisis that rocked the NYM was basically an intra-Yoruba affair that had no bearing between the many ethnic groups that were members of the movement. Even the mass 'exodus' from the movement which followed Azikiwe's resignation, evidence appear too weak to support it. The resignation of Azikiwe from the NYM was not a sudden affair aimed at orchestrating hidden desire; rather, a response to happenings within the NYM. Before the Akinsaya crisis of 1941, tension among ethnic groups was so tense that the newspapers of the time warned against it. The Daily Service in its editorial captioned "we are Nigerians" said:

"A great deal of mischief is done by the thoughtless talk and conduct of the ultra-sensitive element of the different tribal groups. They are the types who are never happy, unless they are nursing a grievance, and who makes it a business to infect others with their morbid complex? This unfortunate state of things is not peculiar to the Cross River Basin. The disease is widespread all over Nigeria? 26 (See Appendix).

Those referred to as "mischief" makers were basically the elite who according to Sam Epelle, "had interest at stake and thus aimed at unifying the different tribes in Nigeria by adopting an encouraging means which would foster better understanding and cooperation. 27 Additionally, no record or evidence that Igbo membership of the NYM at that time was significant. With the exception of Nnamdi Azikiwe and Ogugua Arah who were in the Central Executive Committee, there are doubts whether there were other Igbos of prominence at the time within the NYM. Also, considering the level of Igbo educational attainment by the 1940s, the view that there was exodus of "Igbo intellectuals" may be blowing the issue out of proportion. Yet, some scholars contend that "Azikiwe had the desire to split the organisation in which he found his ambition somewhat thwarted. 28 Volume XIV Issue V Version I

6 Cultural Ties and Nigeria's Ethnic Politics

Every state in the world has its culture which is a practical reflection and demonstration of the people's history borne out of their existence. 29 Basically, it is the bedrock and pivot on which all relations stand. 30 Thus, no society in the world can survive without culture. Before the coming of the British, a variety of links existed between the various states and peoples who were the predecessors of modern Nigeria. These relationships sometimes took the form of war and enslavement, but they expressed themselves also through diplomacy, treaties, religious ideas, the borrowing of techniques, and above all trade. 31 Out of these relations, the crucial and relevant one to this paper is that of religious ideas and borrowing of techniques that concerns culture. For the Nigeria nation-state, the "divide and rule" approach to administration adopted by the British at the dawn of the twentieth century led not only to uneven development, but failed to knit the country culturally. British rule truncated and diverted uneven development as "southern administrators were more concerned with the opening up of the country for economic exploitation?" 32 The neglect of cultural unity was so strong that the only thing that mattered to British officials at the time, according to S.O. Ajayi, was the struggle for political power in "which political identity came to be carved out of social identity". 33 The late elder statesman, Obafemi Awolowo, even went as far as accusing the British of dividing the North from the South, "so thoroughly and effectively that the two were divergently and almost irreconcilably oriented; the one looking intently to be Middle East and its illustrious past and the other to the West and a glorious future. 34 However, as has been argued by a scholar two decades ago, "Nigeria is not doomed to socio-political instability and underdevelopment because of her comparatively extensive ethnic pluralism, 35 rather, it could be used through strong cultural ties to advantage and by extension, help to stabilize and improve our political system and reduce ethnic-based selection of leaders to political offices to the barest minimum.

V.

7 Suggestions and Conclusion

Ethnicity, by its manifestations in Nigeria Politics have produced negative results not only in terms of loss of lives and property, the stability and political growth of the country is being slowed down. The instability which it creates, if not checked, could give credence to Jeffery Herbert's fatalistic hypothesis which has a predestination ring that "Africa has been left with states that will not disappear, but simply cannot develop. 36 It is the recommendation of this study that because consciousness of belonging to a group can never be wiped out of any human society just as with lesser animals, what is needed by the country is national integration that would be anchored on complementarity and fostering cultural ties among the people.

In order to realize the above, government should devise policies similar to those which mandate political parties to have offices in different states of the country as a way of promoting inter-ethnic cleavages. Muslim leaders, churches and even officials of the different religious and belief systems should be integrated into the scheme. However, to undercut intergroup protest and sectional protest, government should have the political will to sincerely without pretence, address the needs of the people. Peaceful co-existence will not only be encouraged, cultural harmony and ties would have been cemented. After all, there is the saying that "it is cheaper to prevent crime, than to control it". Ethnic politics cannot be totally wiped out, but with integration and sense of unity, our practical politics would be better than what we have at present.

In the final analysis, what this paper has attempted, is an analysis of the origins of the politicization of ethnicity in Nigeria. It dismisses the claim that the crisis within the Nigerian Youth Movement in 1941 was the genesis of the phenomenon. Rather, it is of the view that the phenomenon predates 1941. However, even if we cannot wipe out ethnicity because it is only a 'consciousness' the adoption of integrative measures founded on cultural ties is one way we can live with the phenomenon and forge ahead as one country with the possibility of having less ethnicised politics.



Figure 1:

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